



District of Innovation Plan for Willis Independent School District

HB 1842, approved during the 84th Legislative Session, provides the opportunity for Texas public school districts to pursue designation as a District of Innovation.

The District of Innovation designation allows school districts to have greater local control over district operations in specified areas, as outlined in a local plan. Areas that may be included in the District plan are:

Innovative curriculum, instructional methods;

Provisions regarding community participation, campus governance and parental involvement;

Modifications to the school day or year;

Provisions regarding district budget and sustainable program funding;

Accountability and assessment measures that exceed the requirements of the state and federal law; and

Any other innovations prescribed by the board of trustees.

On Feb. 8, 2017, the Willis ISD board of trustees discussed and approved a *Resolution to Initiate the Process of Designation* as a District of Innovation as defined by HB 1842. During a public hearing on the same day, the board appointed the District Education Improvement Committee (DEIC) to oversee the process of developing the plan. On Feb. 9, 2017, the DEIC convened in a regular meeting to identify key areas of need for Willis ISD.

The DEIC developed an initial draft and the plan was posted on the Willis ISD website March 2, 2017. At this time, Commissioner Morath was notified of the posting and of the intent to hold board vote. The plan remained posted for 30 days during which time the district received public input as well as guidance from TEA. The committee met to consider feedback received and finalize the plan April 6, 2017. The DEIC recommended the plan be presented to the board of trustees for consideration. The board adopted the plan April 12, 2017.

The Willis ISD District of Innovation plan is guided by and aligned with Willis ISD's mission: The mission of Willis Independent School District is to develop in each student the knowledge, skills and behaviors essential for life-long learning and for productive, responsible citizenship.

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TEC § 25.0811 – First Day of Instruction: A school district may not begin instruction for students for a school year before the fourth Monday in August.

Exception: Willis ISD will begin school earlier than the fourth Monday in August.

Rationale for exception:

- Ensures semester one and two are of more equal number of days;
- Ensures semester exams can be given before winter break;
- Ensures school will conclude before Memorial Day, which keeps a consistent graduation date and prevents school from going into June; and
- Aligns with college semesters which allows for more opportunities for summer school, internships and industrial certification opportunities.

Guidelines for local implementation:

- After the formal adoption of the DoI plan, the DEIC will review draft calendars and provide feedback, revisions and consider approval.
- The calendar shall provide for two distinct semesters of two nine-week periods each approximately 85-90 days in length.
- The board of trustees will then review and consider the final 2017-18 school year calendar, no later than the April 12, 2017, board meeting. (Calendar approved).

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TEC §21.003 (Subchapter A) – Certification Required – Requires that a person may not be employed as a teacher by a district unless the person holds an appropriate certification or permit issued by the appropriate state agency.

Exception: Willis ISD will maintain flexibility in the *certification of teachers* rule as it applies to specific areas of concern noted below.

Rationale for exception:

The statutory certification requirements inhibit the District's ability to hire bilingual teachers, which is a hard-to-fill area. If a bilingual teacher is needed and an internal candidate is available who is currently pursuing certification but hasn't completed the requirements, Willis ISD would like to have the capability to promote from within when possible, given the individual is actively pursuing certification.

It also inhibits the district's ability to hire professionals with industry experience to teach Career and Technical Education (CTE) Courses. Very often an industry certification or extensive industry experience is preferred to a teacher certificate. This exception would allow Willis ISD to hire the most qualified candidate.

Local qualifications will allow the district to:

- Recruit teachers from the field, including individuals from certain trades and/or vocations with industry certifications, industry knowledge and real world experience; and
- Hire individuals who are currently pursuing certification in an area.

Guidelines for local implementation:

- An individual with certain qualifications who is not certified as a Bilingual teacher may be eligible to teach a bilingual class, provided district requirements are met. Campus principals may submit requests for local teaching certificates for bilingual teachers to the superintendent with the individual's credentials attached. The superintendent will then approve the request if they feel the individual possesses the knowledge, skills and experience required of a classroom teacher. In general, a person seeking bilingual local certification should have a bachelor's degree or equivalent, speak and write fluently in Spanish, and have previous successful classroom experience. Exceptions will be made on a case-by-case basis.
- The superintendent will report this action to the board of trustees in open session before the individual beginning any employment. The Board Agenda, Board Meeting Minutes, and related reports will suffice as parental notification.
- Local teaching certificates will expire at the end of each school year and may be renewed at the superintendent's discretion. An employee working under a local teaching certificate will receive a one-year probationary contract for each year on a local certificate.
- If currently certified teachers are used to fill bilingual positions a Chapter 21 contract will be issued.
- A teacher certification waiver, state permit applications, or other paperwork will not be submitted to the Texas Education Agency.

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TEC §21.102 (Subchapter C) – Probationary Contract: Requires that for experienced teachers new to the district, the probationary period may not exceed one year if the person has been employed as a teacher in public education for at least five of the previous eight years.

Section 21.101 Definition: In this subchapter “teacher” means a principal, supervisor, classroom teacher, school counselor, or other full-time professional employee who is required to hold a certificate issued under Subchapter B; or a nurse.

Exception: Willis ISD will, when deemed necessary, extend probationary contracts to two years instead of one.

Rational for exception: In many cases, the one year probationary time period is not sufficient to evaluate teacher, (as defined above) effectiveness. This is because the probationary contract must convert to either a term contract or a termination notice BEFORE the results of state assessments are available.

Guidelines for local implementation:

- The District will continue to utilize one-year probationary contracts, moving employees to a term contract or to a non-renewal, within the given time frame, whenever possible;
- The District will only use this exception as it applies to experienced teachers new to Willis ISD who have been employed as a teacher at least five of the previous eight years;
- The District will only extend a probationary contract to a maximum of two years; and
- New teachers will remain on a 3-year probationary contract.

